



Book Review Adaptive Governance and Water Conflict: New Institutions for Collaborative Planning

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No Abstract

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Adaptive Governance and Water Conflict: New Institutions for Collaborative Planning. John T. Scholz and Bruce Stiftel (editors). *Resources for the Future* (2005). ISBN 1-933115-19-X (pbk). 274 pages.

Scholz and Stiftel piqued my interest early by writing that the case studies in their book feature failures as well as successes. The book delivers on this promise, providing an honest and often unsettling picture of efforts in adaptive governance. This is a readable, well-referenced and well-indexed volume that offers much to teachers, advocates, and policy-makers. The editors offer up a standard passage suggesting that although the focus is Florida, much of the material is more broadly applicable. Several pages later, however, they more accurately state that “adaptive water governance above all else requires attention to the specifics of any conflict.” A key value to this book is the depth it provides by limiting its focus to a single state.

In the introduction Scholz and Stiftel define adaptive governance and outline five challenges to achieving it: representation; decision process; scientific learning; public learning; and problem responsiveness. The first chapter provides an overview of jurisdictions, institutions, and governing bodies involved in Florida water management. This proved to be valuable in reviewing the eight case studies that followed. These cases offer a rich mix of issues, including water quality and quantity; human and ecosystem use; and relatively recent conflicts as well as issues dating back decades. They also feature diverse stakeholders and approaches toward resolving conflict. Several of the case studies explicitly note that they are trying to avoid mistakes from previous conflicts, reflecting learning, as well as the power of having a regionally focused set of cases.

What makes this book most useful, however, are the second and third sections, which offer “perspective” pieces from practitioners and researchers. The authors reflect on the case studies and present diverse views about adaptive governance, including exploring the power of the status quo, learning from mediators, and grassroots efforts. While there is not a chapter dedicated to it (I wish there were) the role of the media is a thread throughout the book and media coverage is featured in several of the case studies. What the book does cover well is the role of science in water management conflicts. Most specifically, Connie Ozawa’s, *Putting Science in Its Place*, offers key lessons on the difficulties in applying scientific principles and knowledge to political decisions. She notes that, “the lesson from these cases is not that science is unimportant, but that the issues that motivate stakeholders are in their essence not scientific but political.”

These perspective chapters offer a diversity of opinion that make this a good classroom text as well as relevant to anyone involved in water management. For example, some of the authors believe that collaboration and consensus-based decision-making are necessary to adaptive governance and others question whether collaborative approaches lead to improved water policy. There does seem to be common ground however around the idea that much current policy is crisis driven and that inertia is typically the order of the day.

Lawrence Susskind’s chapter, *Resource Planning, Dispute Resolution, and Adaptive Governance*, perhaps offers the best summary of the status quo. He identifies the following key features of water resource management drawn from the case studies:

- we assign authority to government to protect our interests in water;
- we place a high priority on maintaining historical patterns of water use;
- politics invariably outrank science in management decisions;
- most water disputes arise at the local level, not at the policymaking level;
- and we believe that we can meet all future water needs if we just manage our resources carefully and employ technological innovation.

These features, he concludes, indicate that, “the system appears to be doomed in the long run because the emphasis is not on learning how to do better or how to become more sustainable.” The rest of his chapter, and indeed, the majority of the book, offer ideas and varying degrees of optimism for changing this system.

In their conclusion, Stiftel and Scholz return to the five challenges facing adaptive governance and summarize key elements from the case studies and the perspective chapters. Despite noting that several authors are critical of collaboration, the editors conclude that the three key themes to improving adaptive governance are, “stronger collaboration in consensual processes, more realistic use of scientific information, and greater incorporation of market incentives.” They acknowledge that there is no panacea and that, “Nobody expects these processes to fully resolve conflicts” but that “these processes create spaces where adversaries can explore together and develop agreements that leave them better off.”